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Interviewee: Abusharekh, Khalil

Interview Date: November 14, 2011

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

Interviewee: Khalil Abusharekh
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Place: Houston History office at University of Houston
Interviewer: Aimee L'Heureux
Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Born in a refugee camp, Khalil Abusharekh spent over twenty years living in Gaza City. In this interview he begins by describing day to day life in Palestine, from punishments by Israeli soldiers to frequent curfews bestowed upon neighborhoods. After completing a degree in graphic design Khalil made a decision to seek work outside Gaza and found himself in the United Arab Emirates. In his travels, Khalil experienced prejudices faced by everyday Gazans in foreign Arab countries and calls passing through Jordan a “horrible experience.” Eventually Khalil obtained a student visa and settled in Houston, Texas and began to study film making at Houston Community College. Khalil is a self-proclaimed political activist and aims to shine a light on the conflicts in the Middle East through his work. He elaborates on two of his projects, both of them political; one tackling anti-Iraqi war sentiments and the other exploring the FOB “Fresh Off the Boat” concept usually associated with immigrants. Khalil also discusses his work with local cultural events such as the Palestinian Cultural Festival and gives his thought on the authenticity of the events and the modernization and proliferation of Middle Eastern culture as well as modern-day journalism and the impacts social media has had in the Middle East.

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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Khalil Abusharekh

Interviewed by: Aimee L'Heureux
Date: November 14, 2011
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Houston History office at University of Houston

AL: Okay today is November 14, 2011. My name is Aimee L'Heureux and we are here at the University of Houston in the Houston History office. Can you state your full name please?

KA: My name is Khalil Abusharekh or Khalil Omar Abusharekh. I'm a Palestinian. I was born in Gaza city beach refugee camp. Originally from a city called Migdal now it's called Ashkelon or Ashdod in Israel.

AL: Names change all the time there right?

KA: Yeah.

AL: Okay maybe talk about growing up there. What was that like? Put you on the spot.

KA: Yeah, hmm. First the first experience when growing up in Gaza or growing up in the beach camp was when, when we came to classes in the morning and we have to wear the uniform which is blue, navy blue t-shirts and blue jeans and the other school across the street, the other students used to wear different uniform and we were trying to understand (and it was the first grade) what's the difference between these students and us? And we've been learning from day one that we were called refugees and this is our school. Our schools are funded by the United Nations, like our school books, all our expenses and even our food, sometimes our clothes. So we felt a little bit special. [laughs] So that was how we grew up and when I start remember things I start remembering that we have Israelis coming in and out in the city whenever they want. It was called the First Intifada and I experienced several incidents there

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where I tried to throw stones and like everybody does, we throw stones when you see the Israeli army walking by that's your role is to throw stones and two times I was busted. These so those stones came through our house, from our house. They came knocking on our door. I remember I was one of them, about five years old. I didn't go to school back then, yet, and to save me my dad beat me in front of them instead of them beating me because he told me if they beat you, you will be dead but I beat you on their behalf and I was a little bit merciful of you. I didn't feel that. [laughs]

AL: Not at the time right.

KA: But it was, anyways that was the case. So Israelis were around. It was fun when we have a strike when the Israelis will kill few Palestinians, Gazans from our neighborhood. The mosques and the movements, the resistant movements will announce that we have a three-day strike. That was the best news for us because we are not going to school for three days. Certainly the market was closed and everything will be closed and the most fun is that there is no cars will be passing by the streets so we will have the streets our field of soccer we will play soccer forever.

AL: Awesome.

KA: There was being in the beach camp other days were not that fun. When we have a curfew, that was a very common thing in the camp because we were known as a trouble makers' camp, the refugee, the beach refugee camp. So it doesn't go from a month to another that having week or 8, 9 days of curfew where you are not allowed to leave your house for any reason except when they come with the speakers on top of the car or the Jeep and they will announce you have one hour, two hours to go to the market and buy stuff and food every four or five days. And that we known how you could just feel the intimacy from jumping from a wall to wall to from you

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house to your next door neighbors and so on, etc. to go around that. We were fortunate and not fortunate in that our house was almost on the edge between the beach camp and the neighborhood next to us as I mentioned earlier we have the different schools right across the street from us. So my dad used to go from our camp across the street and he will be in the free area where there is no curfew because they were the high-class, rich neighborhood. And once I tried to follow him and I wasn't lucky enough and the Israeli soldiers found me and he slammed me on my face once and I remember waking up the next day [laughs] on my bed. That's all I remember after that slam in the face. But yeah between the curfews, the strikes, the trouble that was the break from the ugly truth of going to school.

AL: So how long did you live there before you decided to leave?

KA: I lived all my life until I was 24, 23 years old I lived in Gaza when I was 23 give or take.

AL: So then where did you go after that and why?

KA: I finished the degree in graphic design, multimedia and graphic design from Gaza and I decided to go out because I wanted to buy some equipment and return to Gaza to start my own business and to buy the electronics and cameras and all that. I decided to go to Dubai.

When I went to Dubai things changed and the election happened, Hamas won the government. Things started to go to trouble again so I decided to stay in Dubai, find a job and see where the winds will take me from there. So, it was a spontaneous step of just going to shop or start new business and things turned out to go bad in Gaza so I decided to stick around in Dubai and learn some international experience or you know get exposed to the bigger world, and I worked in Dubai city for a year. Then I moved to Abu Dhabi worked for another year knowing for the first few months in Dubai the United Arab Emirates that it's not a place for me to stay there because I saw Palestinian families or relatives and etc. where they came to the UAE in 1973, all the Gulf

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countries, UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, they came in the 70s and their kids were born there and their kids themselves as Emirates or locals but they are not and wherever any of them lose his job he is not allowed to stay in the country for one month.

AL: Even the ones that are born there?

KA: Yeah even the ones that are born there. And when I saw that I felt like that is not good at all.

AL: No.

KA: But and I felt like okay I'm not giving a country my youth and the best of my years to just be thrown away whenever they are done with me. So I start looking for options to be somewhere and since I'm not very encouraged to go back to Gaza because of how things are. I was looking for ways to go to Australia, Canada or then when the country, I give to the country the country will give me back by granting me a right to be there to be as a decent human being.

AL: So there's a lot of countries, Jordan is the only country that actually gives Palestinian refugees citizenship so you hear both sides of it, that some people say we don't want the citizenship because we want to be able to return and if we are a citizen of somewhere else the Israelis are going to say, "Okay you're a citizen" you know, whatever. But I mean it sounds like you have a different opinion where you actually want some rights when you go somewhere.

KA: Yeah even if it's Jordan or anywhere and Arab countries where used to be not that great. I mean for instance let me say Jordan. I don't know if you know or not but Jordan, the West Bank was considered a Jordan child. Gaza was considered Egyptian, Egypt's child. So for a Gazan, for me, my passport says I was born in Gaza. When I go to Jordan I will be treated like crap. Doesn't matter who I am, who is the person who is treating me it's just, "You are the

Gazans, you belong to Egypt. You doesn't belong in here. What are you doing here?" So for

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me Jordan never been an option because yeah you get the papers and the citizenship. Myself I'm not allowed, I'm not eligible to get it in the first place because I was born in Gaza. So any I.D. from Gaza he has no right to ask about it. He has no right to even wonder about it. But let's say hypothetically yes I did get it. Excuse me, these guys who live in Jordan and live in Arab countries, even who these whom got the citizenship in the United Arab Emirates, based on their name, their family name based on any document that proves or shows that they are not originally from there they are looked down upon, right away. You don't need to show me that you are a citizen, you don't need to show me your I.D., you doesn't look like a Jordanian you have that second class citizen treatment that's all. So we have this problem not only in Jordan, not only in Egypt, not... it's all Arab countries unfortunately. While in the western world for me when I saw it when I looked at it, it doesn't matter how color you are, whatever you are, yeah there are some problems here and there but when you are a citizen no one has any right to disrespect you or any to treat you poorly and if you feel like it you can fight for it, you can get your right, right away. While you have... that's not the case an Arab nations. So Jordan never, not only Jordan not any of our countries wasn't an option to just try or even not even bother to get a citizenship. So now I mean passing through Jordan was a very horrible experience. Passing through Egypt for Gaza our only border is Egypt. Passing through Egypt to the Emirates or to anywhere, they just remind us in every second that we are not welcome at all and we are almost the lowest creatures on earth, even less than monkeys for them. I don't know if it's a government policy or if it's the people or if it's just social disease but you can... it's not just a feeling you hear it, they express it, they say it, they throw your passport on the floor. They treat you poorly. They let you wait for hours and hours and hours and "Alright, good thank you." You have nothing else to say.

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AL: So how did you get to Houston?

KA: When I decided that I didn't want to stay in Dubai I started working on that. And I started working on that by looking at my options and I found the easiest way and the fastest way was to get a student visa and come to a school in the United States or Canada or Australia. I have a family member who is in Houston. I called him and I said, "I'm thinking about this. I'm thinking about coming to the US. Do you recommend it?" He said, "It's not easy but I'm sure it's better than spending your life in the gulf area. So yeah give it a try, give it a shot." So I applied for student visa, and I was granted the visa and I came here as a student at the University of Houston Language Cultural Center in 2000, January 2008.

AL: Wow so, so you weren't focusing on graphic design or anything like that when you came here for school at first?

KA: At first, not at first. When I worked for a couple years in graphic design and the year in Gaza in graphic design I started to see that I want to be challenged more I want to know more and learn more and I realized there is not much left in graphic design for me to learn or seek as education, so I was aiming to learn film making and I came here based with that idea that I want to learn how to make films and tell stories through films. So that was my first intention and since I couldn't find this program at the University of Houston, I transferred to the Houston Community College because they have an associates degree where the school of filmmaking program and I joined that and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed doing it for a couple years now.

AL: So is that basically what you do for work now?

KA: Briefly yes, that's mainly what I'm doing is commercials, events, photography and videography and short films. I do a little bit of graphic design and photography, commercial photography on the side but you can say it's, the whole thing that I learned from graphic design

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to film making and photography the three of them combined and as a freelancer to do any project with the three ingredients that are needed in a marketing department yes.

AL: This is my favorite question. Do you consider yourself to be a political activist and sort of why or why not?

KA: I think I do. I consider myself to be a political activist. Why? Because I care. Because I care and because I cannot just keep my mouth shut when it needs, I can't. How? When I first moved to Houston I started seeing people, a group of people protesting [Justice for Palestinians] on 59 Highway, on one of the bridges I think it's called Mandell [Street] Bridge and I went there and stopped by. I was very energetic and actually it was during the war, before the war of 2009, I started going with them and protesting with them. They were fascinating to me these very old guys and they are just spending time to, time and energy and resources to fight for Palestinians for the Palestinian cause, for Gaza and the siege on Gaza. I felt overwhelmed by their energy like I have to be working with these guys. I have to be doing something. I just not came here and, and everything I have and everything I feel, I feel sense of guilt that what I'm enjoying and things I'm having here for granted, I didn't have in Gaza and people don't have in Gaza and my family, none of the people. My brothers and sisters didn't have it so I feel it's part of me, part of what I should be doing is the least, the least if nothing else is to think about them, consider them and whenever there is a chance to help and shed awareness on our cause and our problem I will do that. It was very obvious in all of my school projects, all my school writings when I started writing English and learning English as a second language I don't think of any topic where I didn't talk about Gaza or the camp, Palestine or Jerusalem. I'm not a fan, or big fan of the bigger Palestine because my whole universe was Gaza of my camp. So I will not be talking about the big picture now I was talking about my little world that I had my childhood with. So

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now when I'm thinking about making films, short film stories I cannot go away from the fact of bringing Gaza and Palestine even if it's the topic is not about it I will throw an element or two to just throw some awareness or some question as why you use that kuffiyeh or why you use that name and we have it from our history or background. So yeah I consider myself a political activist and also I try to work with many groups in Houston area, Arabs or Palestinians whatever they call themselves in a community organization where they needed help, or where they needed my skills or expertise, wherever I was able to do it I was very happy to give.

AL: That was actually my next question that I have seen you at a lot of these events and with all these different Arab organizations so how did you first come into contact with some of these organizations?

KA: The first was through a teacher, my teacher she teached me at the language cultural center the first time I was here. Her name was Jackie Carpenter and she introduced me to a woman named Sahar Abusada and we were both from Gaza and that was her common factor that he's from Gaza you are from Gaza you might know him, he might know you. And I worked with Sahar on several projects and from Sahar the snowball just started to escalate and to get bigger and to start knowing people here and there and people start to see me in the events and they started to contact me and invite me to their events or ask me to come and photograph them and it's a small world.

AL: Well once you know her I mean you know she knows everybody so...

KA: Yeah so through it was the first event and from the first event things started to go around and whenever there is something right now I will receive on Facebook or when my email a buzz that this so and so going. If I feel like going or if I have the time or whatever the reasons I'll go

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if not then I'll pass. But I consider myself to a certain degree involved in the community and involved in their activities.

AL: I guess a larger question is whether you think (since you do photography and film and sort of art) do you think that's political and do you view your own work as political?

KA: I don't think there is anything we do that doesn't have a political influence in it except paying the bills. And for that and in that I can see that there is also political influence because when you pay the bills you pay taxes and you pay this and if you want to follow that you can also be fighting for our right or arguing or debating or calling a congressman or calling somebody. It's not I don't want to pay my taxes for this or that. So I don't see anything going for granted or going for no reason. I think everything we do and every step we take has influence and every one of us knows exactly where he is going and for the most part, [laughs] knows what he wants to do and why he is doing things. So yeah I think my art, my skills, all my knowledge I try as much as possible to use it to advocate my case and to advocate and to publicize my cause.

AL: So let's talk a little bit about some of the projects that you've worked on. I saw a little clip of something you did with Leila, Leila was in it was that like a short film or what, maybe talk about that a little because that was really cool.

KA: There was a short, it was a school project. I had a cinematography class and we have to do two projects so it's a group project. So the first one we voted that okay I was the one with the equipment and with the skill so we were bargaining that okay what everybody will bring to the table. And they said, "Okay we have the script we have this commercial" and it was a Cheetos commercial and I thought it was so stupid that I don't want to deal with it. But I cannot work on my own like usual because all my life I never felt comfortable with working with groups so I

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always played solo throughout my college and through work and usually that's the case but this time I couldn't escape it. I have to work with group and there were about 5 of them. So I had a deal with that the first project I'll do the Cheetos commercial the way they want it but the second one it will be my script. They agreed and as I say it will be my script and everybody will work on. Agreed, done deal. So I had that script in the back of my head of having a girl called Dalal and I was thinking that Dalal Mughrabi she is the first Palestinian resistance girl who did an operation inside of Tel Aviv and she is a big figure we have her picture everywhere in Gaza.

AL: She's an icon right?

KA: She's an icon yeah she's an icon. And I felt I want this Dalal to do something. I don't know what was it [laughs] and because I wanted to screen this for HCC and my teacher and everybody I wanted them to get the message, so I thought about it if I'm going to portray a Palestinian cause nobody will interact with it. But to make it more provocative I will talk about Iraq and the war in Iraq. So I have Dalal as an Iraqi rebellious or rebellion who will do her job against someone else who is doing his job, which is an American soldier. So I have the script it was very offending to many for most of the students they didn't want to work on it, but we have the deal and they have to obey and they have to do to support it, so they brought the uniform they brought everything and they came in. The message I wanted to portray is it came from a bumper sticker, "Support our troops, bring them home." And I felt it is very legit that the ultimate support for these poor kids who are going to be killed nonetheless in Iraq or anywhere other than their country by bringing them home, not by keeping them fighting in there. And I have the scenario so I wrote it and we did it. The to take the message "support our troops by bringing them home" some of the teachers when they saw it they got very excited about it and they wanted me to continue it and tell them more about this girl, what she is doing, she is moving to

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the U.S. now yes. But for me it was just a deliverance of message that I am anti the war in Iraq, I am anti any war that the U.S. is taking a place different from this soil because for me it's not a freedom or anything it's just an occupation. It's an imperialistic so let everybody stay on their grounds and everybody will be happy, nobody will attack anybody. So that was the short film that I did. It's done, it was screened. It has technical problems but in general I think they I mean I delivered the message.

AL: And I'm not sure if you are still working on the FOB [Fresh Off the Boat] short but maybe you could talk about that a little because I liked the concept of that.

KA: When I came here I used to think English is what we learn in the book and it's about grammar (which I wasn't very good at by the way I was really badly in grammar, English grammar). And I realized when you come here you need to learn a lot about life and how people talk and how people use expressions and all of that. And I'm someone who doesn't learn something briefly and say, "Yes I mastered it." I really look to the details of things and almost perfection and I felt like, "Man I'll never be good in English in here." And it came the main challenge, the first challenge was that my cousin in here she said, "Don't act like a FOB" and I was like, "Alright, cool. Since you asked me 'Don't act like it' I'll follow your lead but tell me what is a FOB?" She said, "Fresh off the boat" and I thought it very interesting. A couple years in the U.S. that some of the guys who came with me started calling others FOB's. I'm just like, hold on a second here, [laughs] you know, who is supposed to call who a FOB and based on what? So I don't consider myself anything but a FOB still and I felt like it's going to be cool to ask people, to ask FOB's about FOB and what do you think about it? What born, or born Americans who are here what do they think about us? What do they perceive about us? What do they see are we interfering in their life or their experience? So all this human mix of emotions or

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social things came from a simple three letter word and when I did a little bit I found that it's not only Arabs, Pakistanis they have their own version of FOB, which is FOB too and they use it for the Pakistani's. Vietnamese and many, every culture, almost every culture they have this "us and them and we are better than them because we stayed here and we are more fluent in English and our English is better than them and they don't get the way we talk and the way we speak and the way we express ourselves, we dress." So yeah it's about dress, it's about speaking it's nothing about what is important. It is all about materials, ridiculous very superficial elements, and people they just obsess with it to the point that it's a distinguished like, it's a color or an ethnicity or so I felt it very interesting. But I couldn't get into the details of the conversations with people. People always like to look nice in front of the camera and I couldn't, not I couldn't, I didn't have the time and I didn't try hard enough to extract things out of people the true stuff... the true, truth about themselves. And since I couldn't feel it that they are natural that they are real I couldn't finish the movie because they are just faking it. They are saying what is right and this is why I just put it on hold. I have from time to time I go back and look at it and try to come up with a different narrative to the story or to a different way but I think it's not mature enough to call it a documentary yet. It's just a trial.

AL: Well I hope you finish it because I want to watch it. So we already talked about you working with the various organizations in town but is there something that you hope to accomplish by working with these groups in town, the specific groups that you work with?

KA: I have a dream (like MLK), [laughs] I have a dream that Arabs or it doesn't matter who are the Arabs or Muslims or who these guys are trying to do something in this country by delivering a message. I hope they will just appreciate or not appreciate pay a little bit of attention to the silly things that they consider silly. Which is their picture in the media, their

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logos the color they are using, the themes and the graphics and their print outs and they should just pay a little more attention for that because it makes a huge impact. When they make a commercial, a video commercial they should use the right people and use the right message, put some effort in it. Because yeah buying the best food and putting in the best hotel is nice but without the right marketing you are wasting your resources and wasting your time and people's time. I think marketing is the master key for anything and unfortunately I didn't see any of those organizations or any of these people doing marketing right. They are just amateurs trying things because they look cool and they don't have I think the bigger understanding of the importance of mastering a marketing skill. So that's why I hope they will realize and that's what I hope they will realize not only in their social work but also in their daily life. Because they want to look nice, they want to be nice but they don't put enough effort in it to market themselves right and I think it's all about how to market yourself. How to market your culture, your religion, your ethnicity, your food, your music, anything. Just put some passion in it to market it right and I think you will deliver a message so that's what I think and I hope they will be able to.

AL: Let's see okay I wanted to ask you about the Palestinian Cultural Festival and I know you had a really cute little girl walking around and interviewing people for you and you were there the whole time. So I wanted to talk about your experience there and sort of what you thought about what they are taking the culture the Palestinian culture of and bringing to Houston and how that relates to the reality back home?

KA: For the first time after 3 years in Houston I was surprised when I saw what I saw in the Palestinian [Cultural] Festival and I'm kind of very hard to please when it comes to organizing events and cultural things. I think because I lived in Gaza and I saw when people talk to themselves as Gazans as Palestinians, we are addressing our issues for ourselves and we are not

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addressing them to the world and then I work with journalists and I saw how we could address our issues to the world that was second and then I went to Dubai and I was working on a satellite channel in _____ and I realized all these ceremonies and big events and luxurious organizations for events and I came to Houston and I was extremely disappointed [laughs] because it has none of that. None of that buff. It doesn't have the fake luxurious wow factor that you have in Dubai. It doesn't have the true authentic nature you have in Gaza and it doesn't have any taste, it's not even water because water, it quenches your thirst but these events, they didn't unfortunately and I tried to help. I tried to as much as I could and I do that by portraying the pictures right and taking care of focusing on my skill. And I did, but in reality for the people who were there they were not feeling that. They were not enjoying the event they were just there because their parents wanted to be there or their families are there. "Ah, let's go." Another crappy event. Then the first Palestinian [Cultural] Festival I saw that they're on the right track. They, I think they worked right. They did it nicely. I think they respected the minds of Arab Americans who were born here by bringing poets from I don't even remember her name but she was an excellent girl who were very fascinating. I liked that they brought the, how things are in Palestine. The singer with a band, and a singer who was not singing the pop songs, but the authentic Palestinian songs. So and I think it was well planned and well done and I really enjoyed everything in it. And I hope they will do it much, much better next year, yeah next year.

AL: They also had a Palestinian rapper what did you think of that sort of meshing the two cultures in one?

KA: I saw rap, I interviewed rappers in Kazul, so I think they proved themselves and they are, to a certain degree I'm a fan of rap but the high quality rap where I call it like Offendum and these guys who bring really rich Arab poem and combine with really good English not only just University of Houston

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a bunch of words with a tune and a beat or anything. I like when things are done with respect to the audience and I think very few are there yet. And there are some in the Middle East the huge area of the Middle East between North Africa, Morocco, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, not much but there are a few that are coming up. But in here I didn't see anybody but Omar Offendum and a circle around him. I don't remember any of the names but there was a group of artists that I really respect. Some of them they do rap, others they do different kinds of music, but I love their high quality music they are producing. And I also liked that the Palestinian festival did that. But sometimes and it's a criticism to the Houston Palestinian Festival like that girl, I don't remember her name.

AL: Abeer Alzinaty, Sabreena the Witch.

KA: Sabreena. When they brought her to the Houston Palestinian [Film] Festival I don't disagree with her, but the whole theme of the Houston Palestinian Film Festival used to be with that girl the whole theme of the singers and the rappers and the whole event. There are some people who are from the Middle East who are rebellious against what's going, against our social problems in the Middle East. Like she was addressing those issues of human rights and not human rights I'm sorry woman rights and yes it's there, it's in Gaza, it's in the West Bank it's in Palestine in general but it's not there enough for you to sing a song about it because I think or I believe or I think that there is many, many more beautiful things to think to sing about more than having a message of being rebellious about a culture that is not a mature yet. That is not, that is really old culture. So you cannot just confront it with modernization right away. You have to gain its trust by raising it and then drip some of the new ideas. Based on you, by your behavior but when you come to just face, confront the, that culture and disrespect it I just, that turns me off. I don't know if I was clear in that point.

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AL: Yeah. Okay one more question about the Palestinian Festival, there was a lot of dabka dancing the traditional dancing and somebody I met there was telling me that they you know grew up in Jordan but Palestinian and they would go to all these Palestinian events weddings and things like that and they would see the dance a little bit, but it wasn't much and he was saying that he was surprised when he came to America to see how much the Palestinians here emphasized this cultural dance. So I was hoping maybe that you could talk about that. If you witnessed it in Gaza and like compared to the U.S.?

KA: In Gaza my experience in Gaza is about dabka, that we, the United Nations used to organize summer camps every year. It's for students to not spend the summer away and so they will gather in the schools, activities, play have fun and it was a big part of that every year that there is a group of dabka. So every year during the summer all we would be doing is dabka, not myself I wasn't that talented. I tried to learn it and I felt just I didn't have it. I didn't have... so it was very common. Plus every wedding in Gaza we have two kinds of things. [laughs] We have Islamic weddings for those who are with Hamas or the Islamist parties and that will have a sketch. I mean, there have to be entertainment. It has to be in the event. And the Islamic part in Gaza they will do an educational sketch, where it's a play. Sometimes they did the Wizard of Oz, not in a wedding but yeah they organized the Wizard of Oz and they organize all these big plays, Snow White and as kids and grown-ups we would love to go to these plays and watch them because they were interesting. So a small short version of these plays would be done in the Islamic weddings. On the other hand on liberal weddings or the open free weddings they would have music, they will have a band they will have a singer and it has to have dabka. And there is some certain famous bands, dabka bands, that you have them booked for a year or two to get them to come and to play in your wedding to dance in your wedding and they were paid big

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bucks. So it was very important, very present in every event, every wedding. People will just go and they will not go to the whole party the night before the wedding but whenever they start hearing the tunes and the song of the dabka everybody would be coming from everywhere to watch and they will judge if it's a good dabka or not. And if it's just bullshitting us by putting these crazy moves that they are not original, not this is traditional original and this is mix, this is a hybrid, I mean I think the taste or the, the taste of the dabka in Gaza was smart enough not to... it progressed and it became a product that everybody wanted as entertainment. When I moved to the U.S. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed that people have it as something from home that they want to show the world and I felt nice about it. But what I didn't like about it when you go see the string of people dancing you will have four or five kinds of dabkas in the same line.

AL: Yep!

KA: And you have these people who are jumping up and down (which is the Syrian dabka) and you have these jumping with the legs and their hip is straight (which is I think is Lebanese) and the Palestinian is not completely different but it's different and you have everybody has his own version [laughs] in the same line. So that sometimes is "Oh gosh! What are you doing guys?" But for the most part I feel nice about it because I think it's a nice representation of a happy community who is representing themselves with dances and music and I don't think there is a better person representation than that yeah?

AL: What about the food at the festival was it, I mean do you think it was like authentic Palestinian food or it's sort of changed and become slightly Americanized?

KA: It's not Americanized, but it's it's not authentic as it should be. It's not Americanized, but people want to sell things. That's the bottom line. And if you have a large audience of Syrians you will start mixing what Syrians like and in the falafel or in the hummus and for

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instance let me compare to things in Palestine. I'm not comparing country with a country. In Gaza we are a Mediterranean city, right in the Middle East, the Mediterranean Sea, The West Bank. So in Gaza we have fish, olive oil, tomatoes, basil, all over the spectrum of our kitchen ingredients. In the West Bank when I went to Dubai and I start dining with friends from the West Bank I start finding because they are having this nomadic culture of sheeps, shepherds so they have milk in everything. And their food, I mean the same dish we would cook with tomato sauce they will have it with milk and so on. I don't remember eating milk in a dish except one and we didn't like it and we hated it all the time and my mom stopped cooking it after a while. But I mean between the West Bank and Gaza we are in Palestine you have this huge difference, major difference, now our kitchen or our cuisine. So when I came here I start to see that people are trying to satisfy everybody, and gain everybody, which is I don't like that but sometimes when I go eat something I feel like this isn't real falafel. Real falafel means my falafel what I grew up on the Gazan falafel, which is full of chili and very spicy whatever. Gaza everything has to be...

AL: Spicy?

KA: Burning spicy. But overall I, I like the restaurants who worked with the festival, who usually works with the festivals and I like it more then when groups like the NAAP, the Network of Arab American Professionals, do it because it brings the personal touch. Because it's not a restaurant, it's individuals. Like I remember one of them was Tunisian and she brought some Tunisian elements into the dish, which was nice. But the problem is, the problem is actually that when I went to New York and I went to Grand Central Station and I went to eat falafel in New York that was my biggest thing. And I went and I think the girl who served me she was Filipino or she is from Southeast Asia, and when I ate the falafel it was the most disgusting sandwich of

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falafel I ever ate in my life. And my friend was with me and he said, "Come on lad you're a diva" or you are high maintenance or something like that. I said, "No." But I'm sorry I should have known better because who is serving me she doesn't make a difference to her to mix the tomatoes with something else that is a violation in Gaza. You cannot, for instance, mix eggs and tomatoes. If you do that you will be killed because it's wrong, it's not going to happen that way. So when she it doesn't make a difference to her to mix things together. Yeah and a friend of mine worked in a Demassi restaurant. All of the workers were from Hispanic, I mean they were Hispanic and I don't blame them for the quality of the food. I blame the guy who told them how to do it. But there is something we always say in Gaza that you have the love in the food and that is what is missing in _____ you didn't have the passion or the love. You didn't sense the hands or the... we call it the breath it is a literal translation of the breath, a breath of them we call your mom has a better breath then my mom in her that special dish. So here it's just losing that big factor. Yeah the ingredients are right, but there is something more that I cannot explain. It is just not there. So sometimes I like when they just assign it for people not restaurants because I think when the people, the people try to bring something their own to present it in the food and that I saw it when Hadeel Assali [Founder of the Houston Palestine Film Festival] and Omar Shishakly [very active in NAAP] were doing Falafel and her mom was cooking and her grandma and I saw other women were cooking. I loved that scene and the Palestinian Festival and I love it usually when it happens in the Houston Palestinian Film Festival in the previous years because I saw that factor of personal in interaction and love being brought into a dish.

AL: It's the missing ingredient you have to have love. Okay the last couple of questions I wanted to ask you about, you talked earlier about the way Arabs here market themselves and I thought that was really interesting because a lot of people talk about the negative image they

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have in the media. So maybe you could talk about that a little bit what you think about the image of Palestinians or Arabs specifically in the U.S. media.

KA: I blame ourselves in the first place. I used to and I am still doing and I will be blaming ourselves for that. It's not anybody's fault but us. Because for instance I started learning photography because a diploma I learned in Gaza where Mia Grandal she was a Swedish journalist came to Gaza to give the Gazan journalists, the photographers a lecture about that. Everybody was interested in the technique but she was selling something else. She was trying to tell us that, "Guys you are taking the wrong pictures and sending them to the world and that's not how you change your picture. That's now how we present yourself." And she was the largest influence on me in everything as media wise. Because as a Palestinian one day I was working with a journalist who works for the New York Times I was his translator. We have dinner together with a friend of mine who is an artist, he is a painter. We have dinner, me, Balal (my friend) and the journalist. Cool everything was fun we ate falafel everybody went home. The next morning we are supposed to meet. I met the journalist. Okay called Balal that is not ours. What's up? Balal was killed last night. Alright so I'm angry. I'm pissed off to the sky. His body is a thousand pieces of flesh. Yeah that's how things are. That's how.. that wasn't the first time. That wasn't the first friend and I do want to, you want to fuck up the whole world for this. You go to the funeral and you are angry, you are exploding, your blood is boiling and many others like you because they all have this good relationship with that guy. His for some brother he is a cousin it doesn't matter and you will see the anger coming to the surface. As a photographer which I wasn't back then I was videotaping. You will capture your anger no matter what. You will capture it in the machine guns in the masked faces and all that and you want to scare the whole world with your anger because you are extremely angry and you are

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extremely outraged by what happened last night. Cool but this is not helping us and it never helped and it never will help. And I think I learned the lesson and I stopped taking pictures of blood. I stopped taking pictures of machine guns or people carrying machine guns and I blame ourselves for that flaws and when I went to Gaza this summer after leaving Gaza for 5 years I went and I met my fellow photographers, some of them and I felt so bad and very upset when I realized that the way I left them, the way they are nothing changed except they have better cameras right now. They are living in better houses and better apartments and they made good money and that is what they are doing still. And I'm just like, "What the hell is wrong with us? Why don't we learn?" I think because we are paid well. For instance when I was in Gaza and I was translator or guide for journalist I was making money like I never imagined I could make in my life first day. And I wasn't as good as a photographer who works for an agency like a _____ or writers or these guys are beyond the sky financially. So I think when we get paid well we trick ourself that we are good enough and we feel satisfied that we are masters of what we are doing and we don't look for a new frontiers and boundaries to break and that's in the small level of photographers and for me it's also the are crying wolves because most of what you see is these guys. And if they start seeing things differently, showing things differently everything will change 180 degrees but unfortunately we are not there. On the other hand when you come to politicians, I respect Israel and the Israelis a lot for how they do things. When I look at in a speech for any political from Jerusalem, Telaviv, Israel I'm just like, "Look everything is masterpiece, perfection art. How they frame the person in the camera; how he is dressed, the colors, his tie, his pen. He put in here how clean and shiny, why they are using the flag how it's well and very well dressed. And then you have speakers who are fluent English, speakers and they are passionate and passionate as much as anybody else about Israel. But they are fluent

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American speakers. How many we have? None. I cannot think of anyone right now who can speak on T.V. local T.V. You look at him and you will like him, you will like his expressions you will like his appeal and you will not have a problem with what is coming here because he is speaking your language, your tongue. We don't have that. So and unfortunately what we have in our community and Arab Americans are engineers and doctors.

AL: That's true.

KA: Who are working in the oil and gas companies or in the medical center and nobody just gives a damn about anything else because I think they see paying the bills as paying the bills only. They don't see paying the bills as a bigger picture and a bigger influence on everything in this world. They just think of their house as their world and everything else is outside my vision. So I think we have no one to blame but ourselves as Arab Americans and as a community.

AL: So you just talked about Arabs in America I was wondering if you think that to ask for Palestinians so Palestinians who live here in the U.S. can effect change in the larger picture or do you think they are doing the wrong thing?

KA: I do not think they will affect anything. I'm sorry to be judgmental but yeah I don't think they will make any influence because I wrote a piece when I was on my way to Gaza when I was flying this summer and the piece I wrote it's called "The Strangers" or I don't know the translation but these people who come as guests every summer to spend their vacation and leave. What do you call these guys in any culture tourists?

AL: Tourists I guess.

KA: Could be tourists but anyways. So every year our family our house has the family house, the big family house. So every year we have a guest from one of the Persian Gulf countries who works there as engineer, accountant, doctor whatever and he comes to stay in Gaza for the University of Houston

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summer. Spend the summer in Gaza with his wife and kids and the whole family. So every summer it was an adventure to me to meet these people and to meet this whole, “wow” world that they are coming from because, wow it’s not like Gaza. They smell different I mean I can smell them from the door before they even enter the house. I can sense these guys are coming. So and every year some of these guys they will come and they will start talking down about Gaza and about Palestine as yeah, Gaza, it’s not like here the streets are cleaner, buildings are nicer, life is different, water is it’s better in there. You will not get damage you will not understand it’s completely different from your world and it was and then somewhere I’ll decide if I will talk to this guy next time I come back or become friends, good friends and so on. Until I came to go to the Emirates and one of these guys, one of the friends that I met in the university invited me to go to his house in the U.E., the United Emirates. Alright, I would love to. I would love to meet your family I would love see your house. I would love to see...” I’m going there to move there. I’m moving there to the Emirates so I went to their house and he picked me up from Dubai, then he started going to the suburbs of Dubai, then to a different city which is a smaller city called

_____ and then in that city we went to a tinier street not any more asphalt or concrete it’s dust and sand. The houses are getting poorer and poorer and here we are his house. Our house in the camp used to have a piece of land in front of it. This piece of land we used to put chickens and pigeons and rabbits and plant some okra whatever. A small piece of land but it’s fenced with pieces of metal, random pieces of metal, rusty pieces so it’s ugly and it’s just whenever you want to dump something you will throw it in that. We call it _____ in Arabic. I don’t know what it is, it’s like the backyard if you can call it that. But it’s not a fancy back yard it’s a dumpy fenced back yard. And here I’m entering a back yard as his house. And I’m like, “Okay so you just moved to this place?” “No.” “You’ve been living here?” “Yes.” “So what’s all that bullshit

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you've been bashing Gaza about? Where did that come from? Tell me." I mean I didn't face him with that but that was the question in my head. You've been acting like you are the son, you are the Prince Charles or something. You are one of the richest people on earth on us in _____ in Gaza and I am sure I can sense and I can smell that our house in the camp which I consider one of the poorest houses in Gaza is much, much better than this. So what is going on in here with these people? And I realized that there is a problem with Palestinians who are trying to just dump their roots and fit in. Because as a matter of fact when he came to pick me up he came to pick me up with his local friend in his fancy car, his luxurious car and that is what made the shock even worse because if he came to pick me up with his car which is a decent car, not that fancy I would have expected something else but he came with that fancy car to pick me up and I think he's trying to fit in with that rich lifestyle who is in reality will never be in and because he's not able to do that when he comes to Gaza he acts like he is the superior on us.

Unfortunately I saw this problem common with Palestinians, Gazans like me, myself when we went to the United Arab Emirates worked there to work there we start acting like we own the world with our salaries that we are making in the Gulf and I literally heard them "Gaza man the trash!" Hold on a second here. Dude you are literal trash in here for the locals and for the people here in reality you are nothing! You are unknown you are not even a zero because a zero is a value, you are not a value you are nothing. And that frustrates me a lot and in general I think and I feel that being in the U.S. you are not home in your home and you are not home in your new home and you are not fitting well. To fit well you will be fitting well with Donald Trump or Steve Jobs or somebody in that spectrum otherwise you are not happy or you are not only not happy you are ashamed and you cover things by lies when the poor people in Gaza or the West Bank that you are talking to or you are trying to hide that part of your life being from Palestine

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by trying to fit in here and say, "Come on man I was in Gaza in the richest neighborhoods in Gaza and in the West Bank." Trying to be, trying to look for your identity which is hard to find because I think we are destined to not have that part of a normal life, the identity. I'm sorry I went too deep.

AL: No that's good! That's the heart of the question you know is the Palestinian identity and not being able to be there, not having a country.

KA: People just want to have a magical answer for everything and I mean I have this conversation times and times over with a friend of mine with a dear friend and _____ right now. He's from Gaza and we have been talking we thought to a certain degree that you know what? We are destined to be born with issues in our identities. The norm is these people who were born in there and who are humble and nice and didn't have these psychological problems. They have everything on their plate when they were born. They were born to rich families, decent life, higher education they can get and all that and decent living and we thought that they survived the life by being normal human beings when they grow up and that's the norm and we are abnormal. We are not normal. Our childhood in Gaza and being born in that condition and in that situation and going through what we went through and our parents being learning while they are raising us. They were not knowing what they are doing. You will find the eldest is the rat, the guinea pig of the experiments of the parents and that they get better as far as they go down in the family and the kids. But for instance when I was reading Steve Job's book I realized that hold on a second... this guy was having a problem with his identity as well and this is why he screwed things up or he makes things perfect at the same time. And it was a seek and he was trying to find his identity I think. And it corrected my idea about myself a lot of it. By saying you can make things you can accomplish things even if you are coming from that messed up you know

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situation. Because here is an example of someone who is exactly supposed to be in the perfect norm but he was rebellious enough to break that and go look for himself in India or something and then come back being shoeless walking the streets of San Francisco shoeless until he opened his company. So I think when it comes to me to describe a Palestinian a Palestinians problem it all goes back to one single thing it's called identity. What is their identity? And they are trying to find themselves somewhere and that's I think is what brings good things and what brings bad things at the same time.

AL: Well I guess changing gears a little bit. We talked about the media representation and sort of do you think the impact of social media has had any effect on the Palestinian issues or representing the conflict from the Palestinian point of view?

KA: I like that I have a friend of mine her name is Marcella she is from Seattle and she is active on Facebook and she told me a lot about how many Palestinians from Gaza on the West Bank kids were talking to her and telling her about what's going on and describing the situation to her. And she became an expert almost about what's going on there from these conversations in broken English with teenagers and the Palestinians tragedies and yeah for the most part the kids are trying to marry her to come here and get citizenship yes that's a fact. But the bright side of it is that Marcella is being very well educated from these kids and from these people and that will not happen without a connection such a connection that that happens and I think what happens in Arab Spain is a result of these tools that are very easy to spread and very easy to break the control beyond the borders. I think it will impact a lot and it's going to but also if we have a different understanding for ourselves. Because in general, in general for Arabs for us let's talk about us. For the most part social media, we take social media as a dating service, seriously!

I cannot think of anyone or anything without thinking of using the social media as that as a
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dating service especially for these who are inside and they are trying to find the way out and because they have no other way of doing this possible to think. This is the easiest way. It's the easiest way, it's the cheapest and time they have a lot of it. A lot of success stories happened in the surrounding so it is taken. Because myself in 2001 I had a friend of mine that came to Gaza from the United Arab Emirates and I asked him, "Why didn't you just go back and study?" He was very disparaged he didn't want to Gaza, he hated it in Gaza. But also he hated _____ more than Gaza because his family is there and he hated how the system is there. So he spent the first two years of his college sleeping, literally sleeping, playing play station and if he is not playing play station or school or somewhere he will be sleeping. Until something rang a bell which is, "I want to go to Canada." Cool how are you going to fly to Canada? "I'll find a way to get to Canada." He stole and email from one of his friends where a big list of girls in an invite email and he started adding the girls and he started talking to them. He found one of them and in 2001 to 2003 he was sitting on the messenger, the MSN messenger literally. And there is a new version of new MSN that's not going to mess up the new version is it? Is anything interesting? It's slightly faster than the one before. I mean he knew everything about everything about chat and chat services and all that. After 3 years he married her in Jordan and it took him about another year or two about 2 years to fly to Canada. So I flew to the U.S. in 2008 he did it in 2007 I believe. But he put everything on hold for that. And he worked on that persistently for 3 years and he did it. He nailed it. So that is a success story and there's plenty of others that I know from other friends and other buddies. One of them was crazy lunatic guy who did it to Korea. He met a girl from Korea and he she took many, I don't know if he got the Korean citizenship or something but he lived in Korea for while and now he is in the U.S. But the back to the point that if these Palestinians or Arabs are not using the social media with the intention of

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changing the world then it's only for changing their lives it will take us all, a lot to make a difference. But if I think its obvious now if they will just give up the dating service for a while things will look better for a little bit. Anyways...

AL: Well that was pretty much all the questions that I had. Is there anything we didn't talk about that you?

KA: I don't think so. I cannot think about anything we didn't talk about.

AL: We talked about spicy food, online dating... I think we got it covered. Alright well thank you very much!

KA: you're welcome anytime.

End of Interview

